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Homo sapiens

Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Producer Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Michael Kitzberger, Markus Glaser, Wolfgang Widerhofer. **Production company** Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion (Vienna, Austria). **Written and directed by** Nikolaus Geyrhalter. **Director of photography** Nikolaus Geyrhalter. **Editor** Michael Palm. **Sound design** Peter Kutin. **Sound** Peter Kutin.

DCP, colour. 94 min. Without dialogue.

Premiere 12 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

World Sales Outlook Filmsales

The images could be taken from a science fiction film set on planet Earth after it's become uninhabitable. Abandoned buildings – housing estates, shops, cinemas, hospitals, offices, schools, a library, amusement parks and prisons. Places and areas being reclaimed by nature, such as a moss-covered bar with ferns growing between the stools, a still stocked soft drinks machine now covered with vegetation, an overgrown rubbish dump, or tanks in the forest. Tall grass sprouts from cracks in the asphalt. Birds circle in the dome of a decommissioned reactor, a gust of wind makes window blinds clatter or scraps of paper float around, the noise of the rain: sounds entirely without words, plenty of room for contemplation. All these locations carry the traces of erstwhile human existence and bear witness to a civilisation that brought forth architecture, art, the entertainment industry, technologies, ideologies, wars and environmental disasters. In precisely framed wide shots, Nikolaus Geyrhalter's static camera shows us the present post-apocalypse. There are no people in his film, and yet – as the title pointedly suggests – he has his eye on nothing less than the future of humanity.

Birgit Kohler

“It was important that the sites had a soul”

Unusually for a documentary film, the theme of Homo sapiens is something that no longer exists. The film shows something that could expand into a vision of the future: the human being, which has been the centre of most your work works so far, is no longer there. What led you to this radical theme?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: First, I wouldn't call *Homo sapiens* a documentary film. It's a film. The film industry and festivals need categorisation. In this case, I think it only partially fits. *Homo sapiens* may be somewhat closer to a documentary film than to a feature film. But I have the feeling that this film is a very fictional matter, also because we intervened to a large extent and changed a lot. The trees, the buildings and the wind were like actors for me. I never claimed to be narrating a documentary reality. For me, this film is a vision that is closer to fiction. The documentary aspect of the film is the fact that the buildings and landscapes in it can be found exactly like this in our present – or at least could have been until their demolition.

Your films Unser täglich Brot and Über die Jahre tell stories of how machines increasingly dominate the world of work, while the human aspect is thereby increasingly displaced. The theme of Homo sapiens is a situation after human beings and after the machine. How can this state be described?

That is just one possible way of reading the film, which of course is structured to make that interpretation very plausible. But I don't want to see *Homo sapiens* reduced to this one post-apocalyptic scenario. Because even in this possible retrospective view of humanity, for me it remains a film that very powerfully tells a story about the present. The extreme absence of people makes them all the more present. So it's a film about people, even if they are missing.

Seen in that way, Homo sapiens is your most fictional film, because every abandoned, weathered, decaying place reverting to wildness is charged with a prior history. But the viewer is left alone to unfold his own hypotheses.

That's how it should be.

In 2000, with Elsewhere, you shot a cinematic trip around the world to track down ways of life that remain untouched by Western civilisation. Fifteen years later, you submit a film that looks where Western civilisation has come to an end. For you, is the content of Elsewhere tied to that of Homo sapiens?

No. The more films one makes, the more people there are who try, from their external viewpoint, to find connections. But that's not what I work for. I have always made the films that interested me at the respective time. Well, you could say that, as I grow older and my view of the world changes, some connections have resulted. But I don't plan that consciously.

The title of the film is the scientific term for the human species, which in this film seems to have died out. What led you to chose this title?

For a long time, the working title was 'Sometime', but we knew we had to find a better solution, because in regard to a scenario of a future in which there are no people anymore, 'Sometime' presupposes too much. I wanted to leave this viewpoint open, but not declare it the only possible viewpoint. For me,

the point was increasingly people, what we do here and what we will leave behind. It is definitely about a responsibility toward the environment. That's why it was important to bring human beings into the title, as well. I think that 'Homo sapiens' as the title of the film is a nice variation of the scientific term, because in this context one wouldn't expect the absence of humans. Beyond that, the term also suggests archaeological and historical contexts.

The images in the film often imply an abrupt collective disappearance that leads the viewer to wonder how that happened. What criteria did the research team use to look for suitable locations?

The research became ever more specific in the course of the work. At first we just looked for deserted places – 'deserted' in the sense of 'abandoned'. Such places can be found quickly. But we also realised how quickly this motif is exhausted. What we needed were places that bear history in them, where you can see what they once were. An empty factory hall and a condemned building weren't interesting for us. It was important that the sites had a soul, but didn't trigger pity. In time we looked more for places whose history was legible without explanation and whose dimensions or whose degree of reversion to nature made them impressive. In the editing, it soon became clear that the film had to keep intensifying in one way or another. Graffiti, for example, were grounds for exclusion in this context. They would have destroyed the whole mood, because the film functions through a stylised aesthetic of these places. The most important point for us was to find places suited to our plan to conduct a critical retrospective of humanity in his environment.

Urban infrastructure and institutions can be quickly made out and identified in the ruins.

Yes. The film is very much about the human system and the question of how humans have organised themselves. We very consciously avoided showing private spaces. The easy identification of the sites has to do with our selection from vast numbers of places, of course. But crucial to this was that, like the pictures, they could narrate their past. There are edited passages in the film in which various objects are connected to sequences of content for which it doesn't matter where they were filmed. Later there are extensively described places that can be recognised as coherent structures or islands: here the point was something else, for example to show the geographic range of a complete destruction.

Image and space could be called the two pillars of your cinematic work. In this project, it seems, you were able to concentrate almost exclusively on them and to devote yourself in a veritably pure form of taking what is given.

This isn't my first film that tells its story solely with pictures. It's just the first one whose pictures are devoid of people. Of all my films so far, *Homo sapiens* may be the one whose character is the most photographic. The image has always been important to me and it is growing more important, and here it almost has a leading role. Shooting *Homo sapiens* was dealing with the given, but we manipulated the given wherever we thought it was necessary. For example, we produced artificial wind, because during editing it turned out that in many of the interiors nothing moved and that this lifelessness could not be countered solely with the use of sound.

Sometimes we used light, and we often used digital enhancement to perfect things and maintain focus. Because we didn't allow anything human to be heard, we could record almost no original sound. The sound we hear in the film was carefully constructed for each individual picture from archive material and from many sounds we recorded ourselves.

How far did filming take you through the world?

We did a lot of filming in Europe and the United States. In Argentina, we filmed the place that was swallowed up by a salt lake and where the water has receded enough in the meantime that everything is white with salt. We arrived at this site at exactly the right time; there were no footprints yet and even the sky fit perfectly. In the film, this is a five-minute sequence that we shot in one afternoon. We filmed a lot in Japan, too, first because of this deserted island at the end of the film, but also because of Fukushima. The movie begins with the mosaics from Bulgaria's Buzludzha Monument, then comes a sequence with footage from Fukushima in which it takes a long time before you realise what's actually happening, because the decay hasn't proceeded very far yet. We filmed from a distance of about four kilometres from the power plant.

Chance also contributes totally surrealistic images.

One of these gifts was certainly the communist Buzludzha Monument, whose form is reminiscent of a UFO. We went there in the winter and had only three days. One day we were fogged in, on the second there was a thaw with sunshine and on the third we had sleet. In the film, it looks as if the pictures were filmed half a year apart. We sometimes had luck like that.

In a film that makes do without speech and people, the rhythm is all the more important. Did you intuitively vary the length of the shots while taking them, or was that solely the task of the editing?

We agreed very early on a slow rhythm and filmed each shot for about a minute. In the film, now about half a minute remains of each. During editing, we first arranged the images thematically and didn't worry about the rhythm, to see how the trajectories worked. Starting from that edit, Michael Palm then began giving the sequences rhythm. Images that take longer to grasp, that one enjoys watching for a longer time or for which the wind dictates a different rhythm are seen for a longer time than others. This was the first time Michael Palm did the editing for one of my films. In my work, I always make the images and allow many liberties in the editing. The point is for the images to find a fitting rhythm, the proper breath and the suitable context. That's not my forte, so I like to let someone else do it. *Homo sapiens* is definitely a film in which a very calm rhythm is inherent; that's revealed in the first minutes. The audience knows from the beginning what it is in for.

Homo sapiens is structured into chapters with fades to black. At first these are easier to understand, but later they become more enigmatic. Without wanting to impose too much interpretation: what were the ideas that determined these narrative arcs?

There are various thematic blocks devoted to, for example, warlike conflicts or environmental destruction. Toward the end, collective decay is all that remains in the focus, for example with the island in Japan or the Argentinian Villa Epecuén

that emerges from a lake. In these motifs, nothing can be recognised in detail anymore, because here we are dealing with a dimension that keeps expanding. The destruction and the reversion to nature accelerates ever more.

The film also moves from the urban space out into ever vaster, inhospitable wasteland.

Nature is always greater, in its destructive force, but also in the certainty that everything will turn out well.

This film without people and speech needed a strong sound element. What was it like working with Peter Kutin in this area?

I don't know who could have done it better than Peter Kutin, because I don't know anyone who lives with sound as much as he does. Peter Kutin had already done the sound design for other films of mine. With *Homo sapiens*, the sound design was an extreme challenge, because nearly anything was possible. Apart from a very few locations, Peter was given a silent film for which only provisional ambient sound was provided from the editing room. We analysed very precisely what could have been heard in each scene: a piece of paper in the wind, a bit of squeaking metal, a bird. It was like enlivening a silent film with music. This process took years, and at the time we are conducting this interview, the sound mixing is actually still not complete; it remains fascinating until the end.

When did you start working on Homo sapiens?

It must be four years ago, although I didn't work exclusively on this film all that time, but intermittently. Something was always changing: we dropped locations because they were torn down before we could shoot, and others were added. Again and again, we would go to places to film and we would find nothing but flat ground. That often happened very quickly. The radar dish you can see in the film was no longer there the next day. Sometimes we were simply very lucky: while we were still filming at the abattoir, its other end was already being demolished. We often found places on the Internet where I would have liked to shoot, but that were already no longer there. On the other hand, the island in Japan, a former mining island that had become unprofitable at some point, is under a monument protection order. It will decay until it's no longer there. With solitary buildings in the city, questions of ownership are often unresolved, so that nothing is done with them – or they don't stand for long. At any rate, the research for this film continued unabated in the background. The film has no natural end. We could continue shooting it forever.

Interview: Karin Schiefer, Vienna, January 2016



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Nikolaus Geyrhalter was born in Vienna in 1972. Since 1992 he has worked as a director, cinematographer and screenwriter. He started his own production company in 1994. Since then, he has also produced numerous films.

Films

1994: *Angeschwemmt/Washed Ashore* (86 min.). 1997: *Das Jahr nach Dayton/The Year After Dayton* (204 min., Berlinale Forum 1998). 1999: *Pripyat* (100 min., Berlinale Forum 1999). 2001: *Elsewhere* (240 min.). 2005: *Unser täglich Brot/Our Daily Bread* (90 min.). 2008: *7915 km* (106 min.). 2010: *Allentsteig* (79 min.). 2011: *Abendland* (90 min.). 2012: *SMZ OST – Donauspital/Danube Hospital* (80 min., TV). 2013: *Cern* (75 min., TV). 2015: *Über die Jahre/Over the Years* (188 min., Berlinale Forum 2015). 2016: *Homo sapiens*.